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ABSTRACT

The literature on language development in young
children is reviewed, and suggestions are offered for stimulating
language skills through informal conversation and the manipulation of
materials. (DB)

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DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS THROUGH INFORMAL VERBALIZATION
AND MANIPULATION OF MATERIALS

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Introduction

Language is probably the most significant component of a young child's education. Although reading is essential in the acquisition of knowledge, additional elements, such as listening and speaking play an equal role in all school learning. As a matter of fact, the child's success in reading is based on his previous language learning.

Even though the child has acquired the essential elements of language learning before coming to school it is the responsibility of the school to continue, enrich or improve his language (Spodeck, 1972, p. 59)

The school has been assigned the task of extending the child's level of language performance. Nursery schools, Headstart programs and kindergartens are constantly searching for new techniques to help the young child develop to his fullest capacity since he brings to school the element of language and some skills.

Furthermore, inadequate vocabulary, imperfect sentence structure and insufficient time to utilize good communication skills during the early childhood years would be detrimental to the child's language development (Wilson, 1969, pp. 161-162)

The purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with some information and procedures which can be utilized to enhance the language learning of minority preschool handicapped children. However, this paper will deal with the black child since it is with him that the writer has had the most experience.

It should be noted also the purpose of this paper is to present procedures whereby the child can develop a language that will not hinder his social and economic progress.

The Child

A child according to Halliday (1970) begins developing his language skills as an infant by producing isolated sounds. After which he babbles and uses words until he is able to form sentences. He is perfecting his communication skills by utilizing words to convey his thoughts.

The first words uttered by the child normally represent a complete sentence, or the identification of something. If the child says the word milk, he may mean he sees the milk, or that he distinguishes milk from another liquid, or he wants some milk. Therefore, if one is to understand or interpret his language, one must observe as well as listen to the child during this phase of development.

Next the child begins using two word sentences. He continues to use one and two word sentences until age 2 and later. After which he masters three-and four-word and finally adult like sentences.

However, the sentences do not follow the grammatical rules used by the adults. They are the child's own inventions. (Bee, 1975, pp. 144-145)

This leads to the important issue of how the child learns grammatical rules adults take for granted. After being exposed to an environment of linguistic models, he acquires the rudiments of grammar by himself. The child uses his intellectual processes and inborn attributes to utilize rules of grammar by creating and recreating speech patterns which improve with each encounter of new data. (Chomsky, 1976, p. 13)

The way he expresses himself is also affected by his identity, self-concept, ambitions and choice of models. Cadzen supports this observation and uses the

concept as an explanation as to why a black child imitates the speech of his parents or peers even though television is constantly providing him with standard English (Cazden, 1972, pp. 4-5)

Even though the child's grammatical rules reflect the dialect of his community his language is just as complex as the standard English of the white middle class (Bee, 1975, pp. 151-152)

According to Frost (1968) the "Come wif me" uttered by the black child is labeled as "substitution" or "distortion" even though his expressions exemplify the speech of his community. His utterances are also described as immature and developmentally delayed because of his scores on the standardized articulatory tests. These results are meaningless until those tests are culture free.

Acquiring language is probably the most significant achievement in the first four years of the child's life. Some authors state that his vocabulary consists of approximately five thousand words by age five. At that age the child normally utilizes and comprehends the basic sentence structures in a mature manner.

He should be exposed to all kinds of words, for example, he should hear words which (1) identify what he sees and does; (2) describes how he feels and things look; and (3) are written in nursery rhymes.

Providing the child with the opportunity to practice these linguistic patterns will greatly enhance his language learning (Marzollo, 1972, pp. 27-28)

The Teacher

A teacher must be aware of the following facts in order to enhance language learning: (1) A child possesses some communicative skills upon entering school; (2) Language development means the comprehension and production

of words and gestures; (3) It is the teacher's responsibility to communicate with all children, even the ones with inadequate communicative skills; (4) A child utilizes his communication skills when it is significant; and (5) The quietest child unless he has a physical handicap will be able to utilize and comprehend language. (Cazden, 1972, p. 109)

She should also be cognizant of the differences she might encounter in children from different socioeconomic groups. She should also set high and reasonable goals for each child in order to prevent the transmission of low expectations to a child from an underprivileged background since children from both groups generally possess the same potential for learning. (Frost, 1966, p. 148)

Time will not permit me to go into the many activities of the teacher in working with children of the handicapped. However, it must be an understanding of the child's capacity to do this without saving comes through tests and observations and among the kinds of tests one should employ or use that has diagnostic values or produce some diagnostic results so that a teacher knows some strengths and weaknesses of the handicapped. Use should be made of the knowledge from these tests in the day to day activities.

If deviations exist in the child's language Frost suggests that the use of necessary props and reinforcers to assist the teacher in this kind of task. At this point of remediation one should bear in mind it should not be used excessively. What is the right amount and what is the wrong amount the teacher will have to make this decision based on her knowledge of each child.

If the teacher is constantly correcting the child's language he may develop within him a fear to talk because of a negative reaction. This excess while damaging to the child may also defeat the teacher's purposes and make the use of prepared materials designed to help him futile.

Teachers know that one learns to talk by talking, listening, being talked with and being talked to. This procedure becomes a support for the child because he feels that a teacher is interested in him and is not reluctant to discuss things that are important to him. Here again as Tiedt reminds us, the subject must be of interest to the child rather than of interest to the teacher.

Intimate talks with the teacher will enhance the shy child's language learning. If these conversations are centered around what the child is doing, he will not feel intimidated. Furthermore, having a topic to discuss and the teacher's full attention will increase his desire to utilize his communicative skills. (Spodek, 1972, 1968)

The main responsibility of the teacher is to provide each child with qualitative language experiences. Therefore, the teacher should ask herself the following questions: "Do I talk to much?" "Do I discuss issues which are important to the child?" "Do I ask questions which require the child to provide one word responses or to utilize his reasoning abilities?"

Her responses to the child's questions or ideas are important because they (1) serve as a model for the child and (2) inform the child if the teacher is really listening to him.

Listening to the child provides him with the incentive to ask questions and recount his ideas, plans, and thoughts. This permits the teacher to ask more questions and help the child discover and identify various issues, opinions and emotions.

In working with children a teacher should always be mindful of the imperatives she may encounter in the child. The teacher should (a) provide the child with an extensive vocabulary, (b) complete her sentences, (c) avoid repeating identical phrases for the same incidents; (d) provide an environment which requires the child to use his communicative skills, (e) give the child

the opportunity to talk to his peers, and (f) initiate conversations with the child who will not approach her or his peers. (Cazden, 1972, pp. 109-115)

Finally, the teacher must set aside a portion of the day for free play. This gives the child the opportunity to listen to his favorite record, manipulate various materials or converse with his friends.

Procedures for Developing Oral Language

According to Webster's New International Dictionary oral means uttered by mouth and language is defined as any means of expressing or communicating feelings or thought. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to relate some activities that teachers can use to help preschool children express their feelings or thoughts by mouth.

There are many methods one could employ. However, the two which will be discussed here are informal conversation and manipulation of materials.

Since talking is a great American pasttime, lets begin with informal conversation. This means providing the child with the opportunity to converse with his peers or teachers.

First one should make oneself available to the children and should have completed all arrangements for the exercise. Do not put out materials, dust tables or complete the daily make-up while the children are arriving. They need a teacher's undivided attention.

Next be good listeners so you can ask questions, provide appropriate answers and help the child identify his feelings. However, please do not talk too much.

There are good conversationalists in every room, but be aware of the quiet shy child. Do not overlook him. Approach the child and initiate conversation. Talk about what the child is doing. This prevents the attention from being focused on him. Even if he refuses to talk, a teacher's presence and concern

will be reinforcing. He knows there is someone who cares and will be available to listen to him.

If and when a child approaches you talk about things that are interesting to him.

Make sure there is time set aside in each day for the child to converse with his peers. This could be snacktime, free play, storytime, music or visits to the zoo, museum or firestation or other local suitable places of interest.

A good formula for utilizing informal conversation as a device for developing language is $3B + P \rightarrow IC$.

1. Be available
2. Be a good listener
 - a. ask and provide appropriate questions and responses
 - b. help the child identify his feelings
3. Be a good conversationalist
 - a. discuss things that are important to the child
 - b. do not talk too much
 - c. initiate conversations with the shy child
4. Provide time for the child to talk to his peers
 - a. arrival
 - b. snacktime
 - c. free play
 - d. storytime
 - e. field trips

The second procedure which can be utilized for developing oral language is manipulation of materials. The teacher will be able to help the child continue, enrich and remediate his language by placing one or two objects on a table, arranging items in a learning center, giving the child the opportunity to examine various materials, asking the child what he is doing and requiring the child to identify, describe and ask for materials.

However, the teacher should not thrust all the objects on the child at once, force the child to play with a toy, expect the child to handle the material according to manufacturer's suggestions or correct every phrase or sentence uttered by the child.

Some of the things a child should be allowed to manipulate are pots and pans, spoons, forks, cups and saucers, egg cartons, boxes, puzzles, lotto cards, beads, pegs, dominoes, balls, cubes, art materials, clay and puppets.

As we all know the first sounds which comes from a child's mouth are isolated sounds. However, this is not considered language until the child begins forming words.

What is a better way to assist the child in this endeavor than providing him with materials he can manipulate i.e. balls, blocks, puzzles and clay. Should not these be some of the words he uses in a preschool setting?

During the next stage of development the child begins using two word sentences. This is a good time to teach him adjectives such as blue cubes, brown pegs, black crayons, large puzzle and small ball.

Finally the child begins using three-word, four-word and adult like sentences. This is the time he should be exposed to verb tenses, direct objects and sentence forms, for example:

Verb Tenses

The boy is climbing up the ladder.
The boy climbed the ladder.
The boy will slide down the slide.

Direct Objects

Susan painted the picture.
The elephant drank the water.
The boy rolled the ball.

Sentence Forms

Snap the windbreaker.
Did you snap the windbreaker?
No, I did not snap the windbreaker.

Some of the materials the teacher can utilize for this endeavor are:

dominoes, picture cards, puppets, scissors, art supplies, and beads.

However, the best manipulative material, very few people consider this, is a book. Books help the child vocalize present, past and future events. Therefore, this is an essential tool in the development of oral language in the preschool child.

Conclusion

Language is essential in every aspect of the child's learning. Therefore, the school has been assigned the task of raising the child's language performance. His school environment should be conducive to his language learning.

His teacher should make sure the child has the opportunity to express himself freely as well as practice appropriate language patterns.

The utilization of informal conversation and manipulation of materials will enhance the child's language learning.

As one can see increasing a child's language performance entails being knowledgeable of a child's abilities and inabilities, exposing the child to acceptable linguistical patterns (standard English) and utilizing various methods and procedures to insure his development of appropriate language skills.

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